

# Anam Cara: Soul Friend

**“I genuinely do not think there is any other grief like it,” says Adrian Hendrick.**



Adrian and his wife Aine lost their daughter Aoife to an infection contracted while battling leukemia when she was just five-years old. Aoife had met her idol, Irish boxer Katie Taylor, just 10 days before.

“She had actually been doing really well and was coming home,” explains Adrian. “So this sudden turn was just a massive shock to us.”

At the time, the Hendricks did not know any other parents who had lost a child and they, like many families in Ireland, did not know where to turn in the terrible and confusing days after Aoife’s passing.

Weeks later, Adrian heard a radio advertisement for Anam Cara. He attended a meeting and realized their family was not alone.

Anam Cara which means “soul friend” in Gaelic, was launched in 2008 by a few families seeking to support one another in the midst of experiencing the grief of losing a child. Today, it is a national peer-support program across Ireland available to the 2,000+ families who experience the death of a child each year, regardless of the age of their child or circumstances of their death.

“Grief is not linear,” explains Sharon Vard, CEO of Anam Cara who herself lost her young daughter Rachel in 2004 to an inoperable brain tumor. “Parents may feel the depth of their grief immediately or six months after the death of a child. By coming together with other parents, they find that they are not alone and have a safe space to grieve at whatever stage they are at.”

Anam Cara groups meet monthly across Ireland in comfortable community spaces and offer online peer-support at all times. Groups are co-facilitated by a professional counselor, psychologist or psychotherapist and a volunteer

parent. The small groups address everything from the physical and emotional effects of grief, to how to handle milestones and life-changes in the years that follow the death of a child. When professional support may be needed by a parent, Anam Cara serves as a resource to guide them to the best services.

A distinction of the program is that the age of the child lost does not matter—parents who have lost a 45-year-old son or daughter are as welcomed as parents who have lost a young child. Yet the different needs of those affected are addressed. Specific resources are offered to young bereaved parents, fathers, siblings, mothers and those experiencing a child’s sudden-death. In addition, family days are held so that when they are ready, families around the country can meet to celebrate and remember the children that were lost and have camaraderie with others experiencing the same.

The Ireland Funds have provided Anam Cara with funding for peer-services and meetings attended by hundreds of parents across Ireland. "The money is one thing," says Sharon Vard, CEO of Anam Cara. "But it's also the knowledge that an organization as important as The Ireland Funds believes in your work. That is the most valuable."

*Adrian Hendrick shared with Connect magazine some of the unique challenges grieving parents face and how Anam Cara cares and guides families through that unique journey.*



**We were concerned some months after Aoife died whether or not it was ok for us to consider having another child.** It was only by attending Anam Cara that we learned other parents had gone on to have another child and that these children were often referred to as 'rainbow' babies, born after a terrible storm. We did go on to have another baby after Aoife died, and she is our precious little Amy.



**We wondered what should our answer be when people asked us how many children we had.** It was from other parents that we learned it always seemed right to mention and include your child who has passed. We always include Aoife and say we have four children, that one has sadly passed, and this is a comfort to know she continues on as part of our family.



**Parents worry about whether or not they are mad not to want to change the bedroom of a child that has died.** They may not want to discard any clothes or belongings, or even change their car from the one their child used to sit in. These were all things we could relate to and at Anam Cara meetings we learned that this was perfectly normal and many parents held onto items for many years as a comfort. We have also done this.



**We learned from Anam Cara meetings how other parents handled the tricky questions of death and burial with younger siblings of a child that has died.** This has been a help too. Sometimes by attending meetings it can be a connection just to look into another grieving parents' eyes and see the sadness, knowing how it is and being able to relate.